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Transmitting Sunnī learning in Fāṭimī Egypt: the Female Voices

Delia Cortese – Middlesex University, London. UK

The contribution of Sunnism to the social, intellectual and cultural history of Egypt during the Fāṭimī period has remained thus far the elephant in the room in the field of Fāṭimī studies. The privileged attention paid by contemporary scholarship to the Shī'ī Ismā'īlī character of the Fāṭimī dynasty and aspects of its regime, has caused the scholarly activities of Sunnīs to be largely ignored despite being the majority religious community that lived in Egypt before, during and after the 4th/10th to 6th/12th centuries. Lack of cross-fertilisation between disciplines not only penalises our knowledge of the Fāṭimīs but also of the social and intellectual history of medieval Sunnism as a whole. In this history, the role of women as participants has also long been ignored and it is only in recent times that women's contribution to the transmission of learning has become the subject of increasing systematic investigation. From a time when Ignaz Goldziher treated the existence of female transmitters of *ḥadīths* (*muḥaddithāt*) as a sort of curiosity¹, today –thanks to recent research – we can count some 8,000 female contributors belonging to the early, classical, pre-modern and modern periods of Islamic history.² Broadly speaking, recent studies on *muḥaddithāt* consist of either general, mostly quantitative analyses or of contextualised biographical accounts of prominent female personalities. In the latter category, research has mostly focused either on the formation and transmission of *ḥadīths* by women who lived at the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and the Companions' generation or on women of the Ayyūbī and Mamlūk periods, hailed as an epoch of revival in female participation in *ḥadīths* learning. Yet, as Asma Sayeed puts it “We still lack analyses that synthesize the fragmented historical evidence to reconstruct more complete portraits”.³

In the eastern lands of the 'Abbasid empire, a precipitous decline of female *ḥadīths* traditionists from the mid-2nd/8th to the mid-4th/10th centuries has been noted on the basis of lack of historical records in early and medieval Islamic sources. In the second half of the 4th/10th century, however, women re-emerged in sources as vehicles of learning and

¹ Cf. I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, pp.366-368.

² This figure is given in M. A. Nadwi, *al-Muḥaddithat*, p. XV.

³ A. Sayeed, “Women and Ḥadīth Transmission,” pp.71-72. For a comprehensive discussion on women as transmitters of knowledge in the pre-modern Islamic world see A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*.

transmission. From this period until well into the Mamlūk era, records show that an increasing number of women acquired exemplary reputations.⁴ Against the grain of these data, in Egypt, the period of history stretching from the 4th /9th to the late 6th/12th centuries (that is the Fāṭimī era) has been typically regarded as time of decline in *ḥadīths* scholarship in general⁵ and even more so in the relative female participation in the transmission of prophetic traditions.⁶ This consideration has been largely based on the so-far unchallenged assumption that the Shī‘ī character of the dynasty must have automatically meant a lesser relevance in Egypt of Sunnism and its intellectual tradition.⁷ We can therefore see how the oversight that has resulted in the absence of comprehensive studies on the activities of Sunnī scholars in Egypt during the Fāṭimī period, has – by default – generated the overlooking of *muḥaddithāt* in Egypt in that era, thus rendering our knowledge of the history of medieval *ḥadīth* scholarship somewhat incomplete. In response to A. Sayeed’s call, the purpose of this paper is therefore to re-inscribe the role of women associated with *ḥadīth* scholarship, who were active in Egypt under the Fāṭimīs, within the history of female contribution to *ḥadīth* sciences; to acknowledge the place that these women occupied in the intellectual history of Egypt during that period; and to revisit, through these women’s reported experiences, the social and cultural norms that informed female agency within a Sunnī scholarly community that operated under a regime that was officially Shī‘ī Ismā‘īlī. In the context of an 11th-12th centuries Egyptian Sunnī learning environment where, unlike the rest of the Muslim world, the institution of the *madrasa* arrived late (in Alexandria) or not at all (in al-Qāhira), male scholars had to resort to a variety of social signifiers to affirm and advertise their prestige and authoritativeness as credible transmitters of knowledge. My argument in this paper is that, in this male-dominated environment, learned Sunnī women played an important part as ‘bonding agents’ in the fostering of cohesion among Sunnī scholarly networks in Egypt and beyond while under a Shī‘ī regime and as useful ‘genealogical links’ in the transmission and therefore preservation of intellectual capital

⁴ This periodisation is extensively discussed throughout in A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*.

⁵ See the statement of the Egyptian scholar and prosopographer Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Sakhāwī’s (d. 902/1497) at this regard in his *al-I‘lān*, p.138.

⁶ M. A. Nadwi, *al-Muḥaddithat*, pp. 268-9.

⁷ For a challenge to this view see D. Cortese, “Voices”.

within family lineages. Women therefore emerge here primarily as agents in the varied social applications of religious knowledge rather than as contributors to it.⁸

The engagement with learning of these Sunnī women will also be contrasted broadly with that of their female Ismā'īlī contemporaries. Throughout most of their reign, the Fāṭimī imām-caliphs were credited with promoting the practice of instructing high ranking *dā'īs* to deliver lectures and hold preaching sessions specifically dedicated to the women of the court and Ismā'īlī female followers at large. In most cases, these sessions are reported to have taken place in formal settings, in accordance with regime-endorsed procedures and based on gender-specific pedagogical methods.⁹

The most important sources on the *muḥaddithāt* of Egypt during Fāṭimī rule are two biographical dictionaries by two Egypt-based Sunnī *ḥadīth* scholars who lived during and immediately after the Fāṭimī era. The first is *Mu'jam al-safar* (the Dictionary of Travel) by Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (b. Iṣfahān in 472/1079; d. Alexandria in 576/1180), arguably the most famous educator in 6th/12th century Egypt. A prolific author and meticulous recorder of his own learning pedigree, al-Silafī compiled the *Mu'jam* mostly as a personal record on the teachers and students he met throughout his career. Covering from 511/1117 to 560/1164, the *Mu'jam* can be regarded as a digest of intellectual life in late Fāṭimī Alexandria.¹⁰ The second dictionary is *al-Takmila* (The Supplement) by Zakī al-Dīn al-Mundhirī (b. Fuṣṭāṭ in 581/1185; d. al-Qāhira in 656/1258). A prominent figure in the history of education in pre-modern Egypt, his *al-Takmila* is the supplement to *Wafāyāt al-naqla* by Abu'l-Ḥasan al-Maqdisī (d.611/1214), a student of al-Silafī. Written by men for men, these works are the product of authors who reported selectively on women scholars on the basis of their own personal experiences, interests and agendas. Notwithstanding this limitation, the *Mu'jam* and *al-Takmila* are the only extant extensive biographical dictionaries dealing with Egypt

⁸ For a brief discussion on the sociology of knowledge in the context of women in the medieval Islamic world see A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, pp. 4-5.

⁹ See D. Cortese and S. Calderini, *Women and the Fatimids*, pp. 28-36.

¹⁰ This work has been the subject of an extensive range of studies and partial as well as complete editions. Among the most important see Rizzitano, U. "Akḥbār 'an ba'ḍ muslimī ṣiqillīya alladhīna tarjama la-hum Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī," *Annals of the Faculty of Arts, Uni. Of 'Ayn Shams*, 3 (1955): pp. 49-112; 'Abbās, I. *Akḥbār wa tarājim Andalusīyya al-mustakhrāja min Mu'jam al-safar li al-Silafī*. Beirut, 1963; Zaman, S.M. *Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī al-Iṣbahānī. His life and works with an analytical study of his Mu'jam al-safar*. PhD thesis, Harvard Univ., Cambridge (Mass.), 1968; Ṣāliḥ, H. *The life and times of al-Ḥāfiẓ Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī accompanied by a critical edition of part of the author's Mu'jam al-safar*. PhD thesis, Univ. of Cambridge, 1972; al-Ḥasanī, B. *Mu'jam al-safar*. vol. 1, Baghdād, 1978; Ma'rūf, B. A. "Mu'jam al-safar li-Abī Ṭāhir al-Silafī," *al-Mawrid*, 8 (1979): pp. 379-383. The full text was published by Zaman, S.M. *Mu'jam al-safar*. Islamabad, 1988. For this paper I have based myself on B. al-Ḥasanī's edition and S.M. Zaman's PhD thesis.

where the authors were contemporaries or at least chronologically close to the period of time in which the women they describe lived.

Early *muḥaddithāt* in Egypt.

In a wide variety of accounts reported in Islamic biographical dictionaries the earliest known female *ḥadīth* transmitters in Egypt are consistently traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Hagiographical and anachronistic due to the nature of the genre in which they appear, these narratives count as *muḥaddithāt* the Prophet's concubine Maryā the Copt and her sister as well as wives or daughters of Companions of the Prophet who followed their male relatives to Egypt at the time of the conquests. Of the latter group the best known among them are Umm Dharr, wife of Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī (d. 31 or 32/652-3), Fāḍila al-Anṣāriyya, wife of Ibn Unays al-Juhānī and Sawdā' al-Juhāniyya.¹¹ A century later, the woman who is given prominence in sources as transmitter of prophetic traditions in Egypt was the 'Alid Nafīsa, daughter of al-Ḥasan b. Zayd b. al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 208/823-4). Nafīsa had come to Egypt with her husband, Ishāq al-Mu'taman, a son of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. Praised for her generosity, piety and asceticism, she is credited with having helped Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) in Egypt, who in turn is reported to have led her sometime in prayer. Her status as *ḥadīth* transmitter rests on the claim that al-Shāfi'ī heard *ḥadīths* from her. As testimony of the close association between the two, in a number of sources it is stated that when al-Shāfi'ī died the funeral cortege stopped at her house where she prayed over his body.¹² In the first quarter of the 4th/10th century, when the Fāṭimīs were well-established in North Africa but already preparing for the conquest of Egypt with incursions in that land, the best known female transmitter of *ḥadīths* in Fustāṭ was Fāṭima bint 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥarrāniyya Umm Muḥammad, described as *ṣūfiyya*, *ṣāliḥa* and *muta'abbida* (ascetic, probe and devout). She was born in Baghdād, but travelled to Fustāṭ where she died at an old age. She became known for her renunciation practices, sleeping only in her prayer room. Fāṭima is credited with having heard *ḥadīths*

¹¹ Al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn*, vol.1, pp. 208-9.

¹² M. A. Nadwi, *al-Muḥaddithat*, p. 268.

from her father and the son of her brother, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qāsim, transmitted traditions based on her authority. She died in 312/924.¹³

Muḥaddithāt in early Fāṭimī Egypt

In the early phase of Fāṭimī rule in Egypt, Umm Ḥabīb Ṣafwā (d. 377 or 379/987 or 989) was the matron at the heart of the only named scholarly family from Fuṣṭāṭ where the contours of the first network of female members as transmitters of *ḥadīths* can be clearly recognised. Nicknamed *al-ṣaghīra* (the small one), Umm Ḥabīb was the mother of the renowned scholars Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣadafī (d. 399/1008) and Ḥasan b. ‘Alī al-Ṣadafī.¹⁴ Her father was a *muḥaddith* and her sons and her sisters transmitted *ḥadīths* from her. She was ascribed the knowledge of many traditions, particularly those concerning the *ahl al-bayt*.¹⁵ Her contribution to the transmission and dissemination of ‘Alid traditions at this particular time was in keeping with the people’s ongoing fascination and devotion to ‘Alid descendants of the Prophet who had settled in Egypt, such as for example the already mentioned Nafisa. As claimants of ‘Alid descent, the Fāṭimīs promoted the circulation of ‘Alid traditions, irrespective of *madhhab*. For example, the Fāṭimī imām-caliph al-‘Azīz (d. 386/996), to counter popular discontent with Jews and Christians occupying high places at court, commissioned in 380/990 the eminent Sunnī scholar ‘Abd al-Ghanī b. Sa‘īd (d. 409/1018) to compile a collection of *faḍā’il* of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. In 385/995 the Ismā‘īlī jurist Muḥammad b. al-Nu‘mān (d. 389/999) was delivering lectures on *ahl al-bayt* to large crowds.¹⁶

The Fāṭimī historian al-Musabbihī, best known for his detailed chronicling of the events that marked the reign of the imām-caliph al-Ḥākim (d. 411/1021), lists several women in his obituary notes for the years 414-415. Several of these women were closely linked to the life of the court. Others were ladies from the broader al-Qāhira/Fuṣṭāṭ society, associated with famed scholars. The fact that reportedly the funerals of these women attracted large following indicates that somehow these ladies had earned a reputation for piety and respectability that went beyond that of their male kin. One of such women was

¹³ Al-Suyūṭī, *Husn*, vol.1, p. 421.

¹⁴ He is listed in the chain of transmitters of Ibn Muṣliḥ al-Māsargisī (d. ca 384/994), a Shāfi‘ī jurist originally from Nīshābūr, who came to al-Qāhira. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 6, no. 2753.

¹⁵ Al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rikh*, vol. for the decades 351-380, pp.644-645 and al-Ḥabbāl, *Wafayāt*, p. 31 and year 399.

¹⁶ See D. Cortese, “Voices”, p. and F. Daftary, *The Ismā‘īlīs*, p. 215.

the wife of the historian Ibn Zūlāq (d. 386/997). Of note among them was also the daughter of Ibn Bakār, a relative of al-Musabbihī, nicknamed *al-'abida* (the devout), who died at the age of 100.¹⁷ Given their familial contexts, it is safe to assume that these women's popularity must have been based on display of piety that often took the form of having acquired a reputation as learned persons in religious matters.

However, the woman of this period who appears to have earned the most prestige was Umm al-Khayr al-Ḥijāziyya (active ca 415/1024). She became famous (*kānat la-hā min al-ṣīt*) as a preacher (*wā'iza*) at the 'Amr mosque and was praised for her piety and probity. A *ribāt* was eventually dedicated to her in the Qarāfa cemetery.¹⁸ Likewise renowned for her piety was her contemporary Fāṭima bint al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. al-Ash'ath b. Muḥammad al-Baṣrī whose shrine became a well known site of popular piety.¹⁹

In the period from the reign of al-Mustanṣir (d. 487/1094) to the caliphate of al-Āmir (d. 524/1130), the most distinguished known Cairo-based female scholar was the daughter of the celebrated savant and erudite, Mubashshir b. Fātik Abu'l-Wafā'. Originally from Damascus, Mubashshir spent most of his life in Egypt. Possibly linked to the ruling elite, he wrote – among other works- a biography of the imam-caliph al-Mustanṣir, now lost. If the figure of his wife comes across in anecdotal accounts as a petty woman who, at Mubashshir's death, threw his books in a fountain in retaliation for the neglect she suffered as a result of her husband's dedication to his studies, his daughter by contrast is portrayed as Mubashshir's scholarly heir. Probably born in Damascus, al-Khafrita bint Mubashshir b. Fātik was also known as al-Jadīda. Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī, who claimed to have recounted traditions based on her, dedicated two entries to al-Khafrita in his *Mu'jam al-safar*. Of her al-Silafī reports not only details about her scholarly pedigree of which he claims she informed him about but also lists the prophetic traditions that she had transmitted. Al-Silafī must have met her at her family home in Cairo between 515/1121 and 516/1122, the only period he ever left Alexandria after his move to Egypt, as he states that he had already benefitted from listening to her father among the group of *shaykhs* he met in the Fāṭimī capital. According to al-Silafī's records, informers of al-Khafrita included Muḥamad b. al-Ḥusayn b.

¹⁷ Al-Musabbihī, *Akhbār miṣr*, p. 239.

¹⁸ Al-Maqrizī, *Khīṭaṭ*, vol. 2, p. 450.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Zayyāt, *al-Kawākib al-siyāra*, p. 79.

al-Ṭaffāl al-Nīshābūrī (d.448/1056)²⁰ and Abū Ṭāhir b. Sa'dūn al-Mawṣilī.²¹ Her death, in 528/1133, must have been a noteworthy event in al-Qāhira as al-Silafī states that he was informed of it in writing by Abu'l-Ḥusayn b. al-Ṣawwāf.²²

Female contribution to Sunnī scholarship in 6th/12th century Alexandria

In the 6th/12th century we witness a growing visibly of women engaged in *ḥadīth* transmission, coinciding with the rise of Alexandria as the most important centre of Sunnī learning in late Fāṭimī Egypt.²³ Though not immune from bloody rebellions, revolts and regime-led clamp-downs impacting on the local scholarly community during the second half of the 5th/11th century, Alexandria had been on the whole relatively less affected by the major upheavals that had hit hard the Fāṭimī capital and by the vicissitudes that impacted on the Fāṭimī regime that period. Economically, alternating economic fortunes escalated into the total socio-economic collapse (*al-shidda al-mustanṣiriyya*) that marked the reign of al-Mustanṣir. Politically, the rise of the military vizier as the effective holder of power debased once and for all the authority of the imam-caliph. Dynastically, disputes gave way to irreversible factionalism. Religiously, the pre-eminence of Ismā'īlism as the *madhhab* at the heart of the regime was declining. Commercially, trading and pilgrimage routes that passed through Egypt were reconfigured. Internationally, the Fāṭimīs found themselves at the crucible of major geopolitical changes. They suffered major territorial loss outside Egypt; witnessed, in the east, the Saljūqs' advance westward; suffered as a result of Byzantines' shifting of alliances and the Crusaders' arrival in the Holy Land. In the west they saw the Normans conquering Sicily and, in Spain, the beginning of the Christian advance pushing southwards reducing Muslim rule to al-Andalus. In 4th/10th century Egypt, Sunnī learning- like elsewhere an urban phenomenon mostly sustained by a cosmopolitan networks of trading communities - had remained a constant in the religious, legal and scholarly life of the country, thriving particularly in commercially vibrant cities like Fuṣṭāṭ and Tinnīs. However, from the late 5th/11th century onwards, with the gradual decline of

²⁰ Cf. Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Lubāb*, vol. 2, p.136. Ibn al-Ṭaffāl was silk merchant from Fuṣṭāṭ, al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol.5, no. 2149.

²¹ Son of a well known transmitter, listed among al-Ḥabbāl's informants. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol.1, no.147.

²² Al-Silafī, *Mu'jam al-safar*, entries 106 and 120, pp.224; 236-7 and al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. for decades 521-530/531-540, entry 118, p. 167.

²³ For an overall discussion see P. E. Walker, "Fāṭimid Alexandria", pp. 36-48.

the Fāṭimī regime in Cairo, and the consequent loss of mercantile prestige of Tinnīs, Sunnī scholarly elites found in Alexandria a more congenial place where to connect. Several factors worked in Alexandria's favour as destination of choice: there was a long-established presence of Mālikīs resulting from the proximity to North Africa and the activities of Spanish Muslims who had settled there, in time, driven there by the Christian southward advance in Spain.²⁴ Shāfi'īs from the eastern lands of the Muslim world came to Alexandria for trade and on pilgrimage or pushed there by political volatility and conflict. Alexandria became an abode of refuge for those people forced to escape al-Qāhira during the years the *shidda al-mustanṣiriyya*. The city had a favourable strategic position as stop over for international transit trade between East and West. Especially from the late 5th/11th century onwards, in Alexandria one could come and go by sea with relative ease and, if come unstuck there by circumstances, the place was not too bad either. Interestingly, the vast majority of Sunnī scholarly families active in the Fāṭimī period are reported to have lived in the port (*thaghr*) area of the city.

This new phase of female participation in *ḥadīth* scholarship coincided with the arrival in Egypt around 490/1097 of the Andalusian Mālikī scholar al-Ṭartūshī (b. 451/1059, d. 520/1126). Al-Ṭartūshī – or rather his wife – can be credited as the founder of the first *de facto* madrasa in Egypt. After extensive travelling, al-Ṭartūshī arrived in al-Rashīd (Rosetta) around 490/1097 with his companion 'Abd Allāh al-Sā'ih. Committed to a life of probity, both sustained their quest for learning and pious life by carving a modest living through trading in salt and firewood.²⁵ By the time of al-Ṭartūshī's arrival in Egypt, Sunnīs were growingly in charge of crucial positions in the management of the Fāṭimī regime and particularly so in Alexandria, where the then chief judge of the city – the Mālikī of Andalusian origins al-Makīn b. al-Ḥadīd – invited him to settle there. There al-Ṭartūshī married a wealthy and devout woman who provided him with a large two-storey house. The upper floor was used as living quarter, while al-Ṭartūshī used the reception hall and the rest of the lower floor as a *de facto* madrasa where he taught jurisprudence.²⁶ Al-Ṭartūshī's wife – probably a widow since she had a son who had disapproved of her marriage with the Andalusian scholar to the point of attempting to kill both – was not only instrumental in setting her husband up as a scholar but it was also through her that al-

²⁴ For a discussion on this trend see Abd al-Aziz Salem, "Alexandria to Almeria", pp. 64-70.

²⁵ Y. Lev, "Piety and political activism", p. 294.

²⁶ See G. Leiser, "Muslims from al-Andalus" p.147; al-Ṭartūshī, *Kitāb al-Ḥawāḍith wa bid'a*, pp. 23; 52; Ibn Farḥūn, *al-Dībāj*, vol. 2, no. 504, pp. 226-7; al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn*, vol. 1, p. 377.

Ṭarṭūshī established important kinship links with the Alexandrian scholarly elite.²⁷ The woman was the aunt of Abū Ṭāhir b. ‘Awf al-Zuhri who became al-Ṭarṭūshī’s foster son and arguably his most distinguished pupil.²⁸ Strong of the financial, domestic and social stability achieved through, among others his wife, al-Ṭarṭūshī scholarly reputation grew to the point of becoming one of the most sought after teachers of his time, particularly among Mālikī Andalusians who travelled to Egypt on a regular basis for trade, refuge or pilgrimage.

If al-Ṭarṭūshī’s wife played seemingly only a supportive role in promoting the transmission of Sunnī learning, women in the household of the Andalusian’s scholar most prominent student, Ibn ‘Awf, were known active participants. Ibn ‘Awf was born in Alexandria in 485/1092 but his ancestry went back to the Arabian Zuhra tribe, a branch of the Quraysh. There were women in the ‘Awf family of this tribe who came to be identified as transmitters of traditions since ancient times.²⁹ Ibn ‘Awf was the recipient of the first full purposely endowed *madrasa* to have been built in Egypt, assigned to him in Alexandria by Riḍwān b. al-Walakhshī, first Sunnī vizier of the Fāṭimīs in 532/1137-38. It became known as the ‘Awfiyya, after Ibn ‘Awf who became the first Mālikī *mudarris* to teach in what was likely the first Mālikī *madrasa* anywhere. He taught there until his death in 581/1185. Throughout this formative period of *madrasa*-led learning in Egypt, the house of reputable *shaykhs* continued to be the first port of call for scholarly gathering. Ibn ‘Awf’s house by the port of Alexandria was a well known intellectual centre where jurists used to gather in groups of seven at a time.³⁰ Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī took notes there.³¹ Ibn ‘Awf’s daughter, Zaynab, became a known *shaykha*, as teacher of *ḥadīth* and student of *fiqh*. Born in Alexandria in 528/1133, she died there in 597/1200. Zaynab married, as she is known as Umm Aḥmad and Umm Muḥammad. Although, as one would expect she learned *ḥadīths* from her father, she also received *ijāzāt* from a wide range of scholars who were active in

²⁷ For a discussion on al-Maqrīzī’s biography of al-Ṭarṭūshī and his Alexandrian ‘*ulamā*’s milieu see Y. Lev, “Piety and political activism” p. 296.

²⁸ G. Leiser, “Muslims from al-Andalus” p.146; al-Ṭarṭūshī, *Kitāb al-Ḥawādith wa bid’a*, p. 23; Ibn Farḥūn, *al-Dībāj*, vol. 1, no. 169, p. 259; Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, tr. Rosenthal, vol. 3, pp. 17-18.

²⁹ Al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi’l-wafayāt*, vol. 16, nos 5433 and 5434, pp.98-99.

³⁰ Ibn Farḥūn, *al-Dībāj*, vol.1, no. 169, p.259.

³¹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 197. On Ibn ‘Awf see also al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 2, no. 783.

the main centres of *ḥadīth* scholarship of her time such as Khurāsān, Iṣfahān and Baghdād.³² Prominent personalities recorded as having given her *ijāzāt* include al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd al-Mālīk al-Khallāl, ‘Abd al-Jabbār b. Muḥammad al-Ḥuwayrī and Sa‘īd b. Abī’l-Rajā’ al-Ṣayrafī.³³ As there is no evidence of extensive travelling on Zaynab’s or her family’s part or of her meeting in person the scholars mentioned above, the most likely scenario is that these licences were brought to her as gift or – according to a customary practice at the time- sent to her on request by correspondence. This however does not diminish her status in fact on the contrary it testifies that she must have acquired a reputation as a learned woman well beyond Alexandria.

Al-Ṭartūshī’s and Ibn ‘Awf’s scholarly fame was somewhat overshadowed by the arrival, in Alexandria, in 511/1117 of the Shāfi‘ī Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī. Once in Egypt, al-Silafī became the most celebrated and sought-after scholar of his day. As his *Mu‘jam al-safar* testifies, seekers of knowledge came from everywhere to learn from him. Al-Sakhāwī indicates him as the person who singlehandedly revived *ḥadīth* scholarship in Alexandria.³⁴ It is in association with al-Silafī that we find the most extensive, complex and diverse family network of women involved in the transmission of prophetic traditions in Fāṭimī Alexandria. Al-Silafī travelled extensively for forty years in quest of *ḥadīth* before settling in the Egyptian port city. While in his youth al-Silafī attended the preaching sessions of ‘Urwa bint Muḥammad, a leading *muḥadditha* from his family who died in 480/1087.³⁵ He started to devote himself to the study of *ḥadīth* in 488/1095 and within a short period of time he learned from hundreds of scholars of whom at least 17 were women.³⁶ In the course of his travels al-Silafī had the opportunity to learn from more women, particularly in Baghdād where he went in 493/1099 and stayed on and off for several years. According to his *Mashyakha baghdādiyya*³⁷ and his *Mu‘jam al-safar* he learned from the following women: Umm al-Faḍl Rābi‘a bint ‘Abd Allāh Ibrāhīm al-Ḥibrī, Sitt al-Balad al-Rūmiyya, Sitt al-Ahl bint ‘Alī al-Bahimashī, Karīma bint Abī Bakr al-Duqqāq and Maryam bint ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b.

³² Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 1, no. 632, p. 406.

³³ al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rikh*, vol. for the decade 591-600, no. 360, p. 283.

³⁴ Al-Sakhāwī, *al-I‘lān*, pp.138-9.

³⁵ Al-Dahabī, *Siyar*, vol.8, p. 21.

³⁶ Beside many references in al-Silafī’s *Mu‘jam*, see al-Dhahabī, *Syar*, vol. 8, p. 21.

³⁷ For information about extant manuscripts of this work see F. N. Hashimi, *A critical edition of Kitāb al-Wajiz*, pp. 11-12.

al-Ḥasan al-Būsīriyya.³⁸ In Alexandria, in 544/1149 the Shāfi'ī al-ʿĀdil b. Salār, a governor of Alexandria who became vizier of the Fāṭimī caliph al-Zāfir, ordered the building of a *madrasa* for al-Silafī. This was the second *madrasa* to be built in Egypt and the first Shāfi'ī one. Though formally named ʿĀdiliyya after its founder, it came to be typically referred to as al-Silafiyya.³⁹ Beside his liaison with al-ʿĀdil b. Salār, al-Silafī was generally held in high esteem by the Fāṭimī regime as a whole. Like al-Ṭarṭūshī, in Alexandria al-Silafī married an affluent woman who eased his hitherto stringent and difficult living. From his *Muʿjam al-safar* we learn that his wife was called Sitt al-Ahl. Described by al-Silafī as a pious woman, Sitt al-Ahl belonged to a family of distinguished scholars, particularly from her mother's line. Sitt al-Ahl was the daughter of the *shaykh* Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Abī Mūsā al-Khalwānī, who had died before al-Silafī's arrival in Egypt, and his wife Tarifa (d. 534/1139-40), also known as ʿĀ'isha. The latter was one of the daughters of Abu'l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Rāzī (d.491/1097-8), an eminent Shāfi'ī traditionist and juresconsult.⁴⁰ According to the testimony of his son Muḥammad (q.v.) the family had lived in al-Qāhira but moved to Alexandria because of the *shidda* in the Fāṭimī capital between 459/1066 and 464/1069. Aḥmad performed the pilgrimage in 414/1023-4 and encountered many prominent scholars during his travels. Once back in al-Qāhira he had systematically collected the extensive material gathered from meeting with and attending the lessons of a great number of scholars who either lived in al-Qāhira or passed through it. According to his son however, all this material was looted –together with the family belongings– during the family's transfer to Alexandria.⁴¹ Al-Maqrīzī comments on the dispersal of al-Qāhira's libraries during this crisis and gives details of how many books eventually found their way to Alexandria. For example, one of Aḥmad al-Rāzī's former students, the Alexandrian *muḥaddith* ʿAlī b. al-Musharraḡ al-Anmāṭī (d. 518/1124)⁴² was instrumental in supplying books that came to form the library of Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī.⁴³

³⁸ Al-Silafī, *Muʿjam*, introduction p. 27.

³⁹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. 1, pp.86-89.

⁴⁰ On him see G. Vajda, "La Mašyaḡa", p. 32, no. 1. His students included the Shāfi'ī jurist Ibn al-Ṣanūbrī al-Nisābūrī (d. after 507/1113) who arrived in Egypt in 490/1096. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 5, no. 2340.

⁴¹ G. Vajda, "La Mašyaḡa", p.22

⁴² His pupils included the famous Sevillan traditionist Abū Bakr b. al-ʿArabī (d.543/1148) who listened to him in Alexandria. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 6 n. 2553. See also I. ʿAbbās. "al-Jānīb al-siyāsī," pp. 217-36 and J. Robson, "Ibn al-ʿArabī", EI2, vol. 3, p. 707. In turn, al-Anmāṭī, like al-Rāzī's children, Muḥammad and Tarifa, had been a student of Ibn al-Dalīl, a *qāḍī* of Bilbays. On Ibn al-Dalīl see al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 5, no 2177 and G. Vajda, "La Mašyaḡa", pp. 62; 86.

Tarifa, described as a woman of sound faith, transmitted *ḥadīths* to al-Silafī after listening to her father. While still in al-Qāhira her informants included Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-Māristānī. She also learned *ḥadīths* transmitted by, among others, Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Marwazī and ‘Abd al-Wārith b. Sa‘īd.⁴⁴ Al-Silafī recounted based on her, shortly before she died in 534/1139.⁴⁵ Tarifa had a brother and a sister. Tarifa’s sister, Khadija, also called Mulayḥa (d. 526/1131-2) was described by al-Silafī as an ascetic woman who remained celibate. Anecdotes on her piety are reflective of the reputation she had acquired. The *umm walad* of one of al-Silafī’s scholarly acquaintances reported to her master that she had observed Khadija practicing all-night vigils absorbed in prayer. Khadija was a traditionist of some stature who also transmitted *ḥadīths* to al-Silafī. Beside her father, her informants included Abu’l-Ḥusayn Muḥammad b. Ḥamūd b. al-Dalīl al-Ṣawwāf (d. ca 480/1087) in al-Qāhira⁴⁶ who transmitted from Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Wāsiṭī in Jerusalem⁴⁷, who in turn transmitted from ‘Umar b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-‘Atakī (d.360/970-1).⁴⁸ She had an *ijāza* from Abu’l-Walīd Ay Muḥammad.⁴⁹ When she died in 526/113, al-Silafī led her funeral according to her will. Tarifa and Khadija’s brother, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Rāzī (b. 434/1042 – d. 525/1131), came to be regarded as one of the great transmitters (*musnid*) in Egypt.⁵⁰

The father of al-Silafī’s wife, al-Khalwānī was described as a pious man who, beside Sitt al-Ahl, had a son Abu’l-Barakāt ‘Isā who worked as notary for the *qāḍī* of Alexandria. Al-Silafī’s marriage to Sitt al-Ahl was officiated by her brother, probably in the year 512/1118. It is not clear as to when Sitt al-Ahl died. This occurred probably after 570/1174 but before

⁴³ G. La Viere Leiser, *The Restoration*, p. 176. See also H. Halm, *The Fāṭimids*, p. 77.

⁴⁴ Unlike the case of her sister Khadija, none of the names linked to Tarifa appear in the *mashyakha* of her brother Muḥammad.

⁴⁵ Al-Silafī, *Mu‘jam al-safar*, no. 102, p.221.

⁴⁶ See note 40.

⁴⁷ Also listed in the brother’s *mashyakha*. See G. Vajda, “La Mašyaḥa”, p.87.

⁴⁸ Al-Dhahabī, *Iḥṣān*, vol. 2 p. 322; Ibn al-‘Imād, *Shadharāt*, vol. 3, p. 38. In the *mashyakha* of Khadija’s brother he is indicated as the author of a *Kitāb al-Qurba*, which Khadija’s brother (and very likely Khadija as well) memorised. There is no mention however of this work in the sources mentioning al-‘Atakī. As the chain in Khadija’s *mashyakha* continues backward, after al-‘Atakī, with ‘Umar b. ‘Abd Rabbihi al-Da‘ā’ and ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad al-Qurashī, it is possible that the latter, rather than al-‘Atakī, was actual author of this work.

⁴⁹ Al-Silafī, *Mu‘jam al-safar*, no. 121, pp.237-239.

⁵⁰ Interestingly, Muḥammad does not mention his sisters in his *mashyakha*.

al-Silafī's death as in the *Muʿjam* he refers to her as deceased. It was reported that the memorisers 'Abd al-Qādir (536-612/1141-1215) and 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī (541-600/1146-1203)- one of al-Silafī's most eminent students- wanted to study a particular work under al-Silafī's tutelage but he kept fending them off until his wife interceded with him on their behalf. If this was the case, since 'Abd al-Ghanī visited Alexandria in 566/1170 and in 570/1174, we can assume that al-Silafī's wife might have been alive at least until the latter date.⁵¹

Al-Silafī's and Sitt al-Ahl had a daughter, Khadīja, who married the scholar Abu'l-Ḥarām Makkī b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭrabulsī and gave birth to a son, Abu'l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Raḥmān, in 570/1174. This child grew to become a prominent traditionist in Alexandria. Khadīja (d. 623/1226), in keeping with her family pedigree of distinguished female *ḥadīths* scholars, also gained fame as *shaykha*. She learned from her father, from whom she obtained an *ijāza* and taught *ḥadīths*. After the death of her father, she moved to al-Qāhira where she was admired for her kindness. Khadīja then returned to Alexandria where al-Mundhirī went to visit her, although he did not hear traditions from her. He nevertheless claimed that she granted him an *ijāza* which he eagerly desired.⁵² Such was the lasting fame and prestige of al-Silafī, that, after his death, subsequent generations of transmitters sought of ways of tracing their scholarly pedigree back to the eminent Shāfi'ī and found, in claiming the holding of an *ijāza* by his daughter Khadīja, a useful way to establish a direct 'link' to al-Silafī's authority via her.

In addition to being pupil and kin of female traditionists, al-Silafī was also a teacher of women. His best known female student in Egypt was Umm 'Alī Taqiyya bint Abi'l-Faraj Ghayth b. 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Salām b. Muḥammad b. Ja'far al-Sulamī al-Armanāzī al-Ṣūrī, also known as Sitt al-Ni'm. Born in Damascus in 505/1111, she died, probably in Egypt in 579/1183-4. She must have moved to Egypt after 511/1118, given that she was a disciple of Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī who arrived in Alexandria in that year. She was certainly living in the port area of the city before 568/1172, since this is indicated as the year in which her husband died there. However, the most likely period of her arrival must have been around 520/1126 as her son, Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Fāḍil b. Ḥamdūn al-Ṣūrī (d. 603/1206), is reported to have been born in Ṣūr before that year. Several sources acknowledge her as woman of talent and wit, who composed *qaṣīdas* and short poems. Described as *adība*, she famously

⁵¹ S. M. Zeman, *Abu Tahir ... al-Silafi al-Isbahani*, pp.60-65.

⁵² Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 3, no. 2120, p. 187.

wrote in praise of Taqī'l-Dīn 'Umar b. Shāhinshāh, nephew of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn on the subject of wine and conviviality. When he commented that she must have written from experience, she rebuked him with another poem on war, questioning him whether he thought she had written those verses from experience too. She knew Ibn 'Awf, who wrote a poem in response to her verses,⁵³ and eulogised her mentor, al-Silafī, excusing him for dismissing her son from his sessions.⁵⁴ In turn al-Silafī praised her for her verses and her devotion to him when, having injured his foot, she took him into her house and bandaged the foot with a piece of cloth from her *khimār*. Although better known for her poetry, she was also a *ḥadīth* transmitter as well known scholars such as Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. al-Mufaḍḍal al-Muqaddasī⁵⁵ and others acknowledged to have listened from her. She belonged to a family of distinguished *ḥadīth* transmitters and erudites: her father, Abu'l Faraj (d.509/1115), was an authoritative traditionist and so was her grandfather 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Salām (d. 478/1085) in Ṣūr. Taqiya's son Abu'l-Hasan 'Alī, became a well known grammarian, reciter and calligrapher. Her husband, Fāḍil, born in Damascus in 490/1097, was also a man of scholarly reputation.⁵⁶

The other prominent female scholar indicated as a pupil of al-Silafī in Egypt was the *shaykha* Umm Muḥammad Khadīja (d. 618/1221) daughter of the *qāḍī* Abu'l-Mukarram b. 'Alī b. Mufarrij b. Ḥātim b. Ḥasan b. Ja'far b. Ibrāhīm Aḥamm b. al-Ḥasan. Although the family was originally from al-Quds, she was born in 550/1155 in Alexandria and lived there. She was the sister of the already mentioned Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī b. al-Mufaḍḍal al-Muqaddasī. Umm Muḥammad is indicated as recipient of *ijāzāt* by al-Silafī and by Fakhr al-Nisā' Shuhda bint Abī Naṣr (482-574/1089-1178)⁵⁷ -a rare instance of a woman bestowing another woman with an *ijāza* in this period. She transmitted *ḥadīths* and al-Mundhirī claimed to have listened from her. Al-Mundhirī described her as extremely generous stating that she gave everything she had in name of piety and that she was respected by all the scholars and those in quest of purity. Al-Dhahabī, however, adds a detail to her biography, perhaps

⁵³ Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 2, no.783.

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Sabūnī, *Takmila ikmāl al-ikmāl*, p. 50.

⁵⁵ He is listed among the pupils of the Alexandrian Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Alā'ī al-Ṣiqillī (d.579/1183), Abu'l-Qāsim al-Ḥijāzī (d.574/1178) and al-Kamāl b. al-Jalājilī al-Baghdādī (d.612/1215). See, respectively, al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 6, nos. 2441, 2740 and 2798.

⁵⁶ Al-Silafī, *Mu'jam*, no. 101, pp.220-1 and footnote 1. There is also a biography of her in Ibn al-'Imād, *Shadharāt*, vol. 4, no. 265, p.220. In al-'Imād al-Iṣfahānī, *Jarīdat al-qaṣr wa jarīdat al-'aṣr*, vol. 2, p. 223 it is stated that she had good verses. Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. 1, pp. 276-77.

⁵⁷ On Shuhda al-Kātiba see A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, pp. 149-159.

deliberately overlooked by al-Mundhirī, by stating that Umm Muḥammad had received al-Silafī's *ijāza* in the same year of her birth.⁵⁸ References, in biographical dictionaries, to transmitters having received *ijāzāt* by famous scholars at a very early age are not infrequent. It is obvious that the granting of *ijāzāt* to infants, whether girls or boys, was intended as a symbolic gesture or as a gift to the child to honour distinguished parents, rather than an actual certification of learning acquisition on the part of the baby recipients. The embellishing of scholarly pedigrees of female scholars by associating them to famous scholars might have –on occasions– also served a practical purpose for the biographers who reported on them. Since al-Mundhirī claimed to have listened to *ḥadīths* from Umm Muḥammad, it reflected well on him to show that his female informant was herself the pupil of an outstanding scholar. Since al-Mundhirī could not flaunt direct learning from al-Silafī, as he had been long dead when he begun to study *ḥadīths* in 591/1194-5, the best he could do was to 'stretch' his association with the celebrated scholar via his proximity to al-Silafī's 'certified' students. What raises suspicion about al-Mundhirī's claim of a direct association between Umm Muḥammad and al-Silafī is the fact that there is no mention of her in al-Silafī's otherwise meticulous *Mu'jam*.

Female contribution to Sunnī scholarship in 6th/12th century al-Qāhira

While formally restored as state *madhhab* with the fall of the Fāṭimīs in 567/1171 at the hand of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, Sunnism had already been *de facto* dominating the political and institutional life of al-Qāhira for decades. Yet, it was probably the fact that until 1171, at least formally, Ismā'īlism was still the official religion of the regime that prevented the establishment of *madrasas* in al-Qāhira. Unlike Alexandria, Sunnī learning in al-Qāhira was still an exclusively domestic, mosque-based, 'private' affair, conducted within circles of highly reputed scholars who did not enjoy the visibility that the *madrasas* accorded to al-Ṭarṭūshī, Ibn 'Awf and al-Silafī. However there is no evidence that the presence of *madrasas* in Egypt, or rather the lack of them, in the Fāṭimī period had any direct impact on women as learners or teachers. In al-Qāhira, like in Alexandria, the home was the place where their scholarly activities took and continued to take place. In al-Qāhira, arguably the most prominent female *ḥadīth* transmitter of late Fāṭimī period, bridging into the Ayyūbī era,

⁵⁸ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol.3, no. 1803, pp. 41-2 and al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, volume for the decade 611-620, no. 520, pp. 399-400.

was Fāṭima bint Sa'd al-Khayr (b. 522 or 525/1128-1130 - d. 600/1203). Born in Iṣfahān (although China -probably Kashghar- has also been suggested), she lived in Baghdād and Khurāsān, before moving to Egypt from Damascus following her husband. He was the preacher Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibrāhīm b. Najā (b. 508/1114 and d. after 584/1188), one of her father's students who eventually became secretary of the Ayyūbī Sultan Nūr al-Dīn.⁵⁹ Fāṭima's father was Abu'l-Ḥasan Sa'd al-Khayr b. Muḥammad b. Sahl al-Anṣārī al-Andalusī al-Balansī, a distinguished scholar who had travelled from his home city of Valencia to the east, as far as China.⁶⁰ Fāṭima's son, 'Abd al-Karīm, was also a scholar of some repute. Abu'l-Ḥasan Sa'd al-Khayr had several daughters whom reportedly he made study *ḥadīths* and also taught himself. Sources describe Fāṭima as precocious child who was accustomed to listening to *ḥadīths* transmitters from a very young age. Apparently she listened to al-Dāraquṭnī in 529/1134 and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī in the same year. Reportedly, she received *ijāzāt* from many scholars in Baghdād, Iṣfahān and Khurāsān. Al-Mundhirī, who received an *ijāzā* from her, states that her father used to take her to listen the same *shaykh* up to three times to ensure that she had learned. While in Iṣfahān her father took Fāṭima to study with, among others, Umm Ibrāhīm Fāṭima bint 'Abd Allāh al-Juzdaniyya, the most prestigious female narrator in her days.⁶¹ In Baghdād, where her father took her in 525/1130, her female mentor was the memoriser Karīma daughter of the memoriser Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Baqī known as Ibn al-Khadība (or al-Khadī'a). It was however in Damascus and al-Qāhira that Fāṭima affirmed herself as an authoritative transmitter and many scholars are reported to have travelled specially to study with her. The roster of students also confirms her rank as a respected *muḥadditha*. Her pupils included among others Abū Mūsā, son of the already mentioned memoriser 'Abd al-Ghanī, the transmitter 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muqarrab al-Tajībī⁶², the jurist Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Wazzān. Ibn al-Khīmī (d.642/1244) who arrived in Cairo in

⁵⁹ About 'Alī Ibrāhīm b. Najā, see G. La Viere Leiser, "Ḥanbalism", pp 168-9. He is listed among those who transmitted to Nabīh al-Dīn al-Anṣārī al-Kātib (d.613/1216) who became in charge of the *diwān al-awqāf* and Abu'l-Khayr Badal al-Tabrīzī (d. 631/1233). See respectively al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, no. 767 and no. 1012.

⁶⁰ His pupils included the merchant erudite Ibn Taghlib al-Āmadī (d.557/1161) who was born in Baghdād but travelled to al-Qāhira and Alexandria. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 5, no.1688.

⁶¹ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt*, vol. 1, p.191.

⁶² Listed among those who, in the 'Amr mosque in Fuṣṭāṭ, met the important *qāḍī* al-Jawwānī Nassāba (d.598/1201) a prolific scholar who had been in charge of the union of the *ashraf* in al-Qāhira. Among those he listened to was also Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Alā'ī al-Siqillī (d.579/1183), an Alexandrian already mentioned in connection to Umm 'Alī Taqiyya earlier in this paper. See respectively al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 5, no. 1893 and vol. 6, no. 2441.

584/1188 listen *ḥadīths* from her and her husband⁶³ and the Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn al-Naḥḥās al-Miṣrī (d. 643/1245).⁶⁴ Beside al-Mundhirī, those who received her *ijāza* included Aḥmad b. al-Khayr.⁶⁵

Female contribution to Sunnī learning at the end of the Fāṭimī rule and the onset of the Ayyūbī period

The number of female transmitters in al-Qāhira appears to have relatively grown during the phase that marked the end of the Fāṭimī rule and the start of Ayyūbī period. On the one hand this trend could be seen as the start of a process of steady female engagement in prophetic transmission that culminated with the ‘renaissance’ of female *ḥadīth* scholarship in the Ayyūbī and Mamlūk periods. One could be tempted to claim that this impetus went hand in hand with the restoration of Sunnism in Egypt. On the other hand, the greater availability of information could simply be due to the fact that the generational gap between these women and the biographers who wrote on them was narrower, thus making late Fāṭimī-early Ayyūbī female scholars (a) more directly relevant to the interests of narrators and (b) more directly familiar to the writers and therefore easier to collect and report data on. Therefore, the relative growth of records about women scholars at the end of the Fāṭimī period might not have been necessarily a by-product of the institutional reassertion of Sunnism that took place with the end of the Fāṭimī regime. Even al-Maqrīzī, when it came to female scholars, only listed in *al-Muqaffā* those ones who lived closer to his time.⁶⁶

The following list of female traditionists, born under Fāṭimī rule but died in Ayyūbī times, is emblematic of how the personal experience of the biographer impacted on the precedence given to some personalities rather than others to write on. Al-Mundhirī claims to have been acquainted to the following women. Ṣafā’ al-‘Aysh (d. 627/1229) daughter of ‘Abd Allāh and al-Ashrafiyya al-Ḥamziyya al-Qaṣriyya. Known as Shamsa, she was the manumitted slave of the *qāḍī* Abu’l-Qāsim Ḥamza b. Alī b. ‘Uthmān al-Makhzīmī. Al-Mundhirī, who listened from her, asked her about her birth and she recalled events that

⁶³ Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 6, no. 2790.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Zayyāt, *al-Kawākib al-siyāra*, p. 222.

⁶⁵ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 2, no. 773, p. 15; al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rikh*, volume for the decade 591-600, no. 612, pp. 469-70; M. A. Nadwi, *al-Muḥaddithat*, pp.268-9, pp.93-96.

⁶⁶ See for example al-Maqrīzī, *al-Muqaffā*, vol. 5, nos. 1562, and 1572.

pointed to her birth in 557/1161. Beside the *qāḍī* she also listened from Abū Ṭāhir Ismāʿīl b. Ṣāliḥ b. Yāsīn.⁶⁷ Umm al-Khayr Futūḥ (d. 625/1227), daughter of *shaykh* Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. ʿUthmān b. Abi'l-Qāsim, originally from Shām, was born around 562/1166 and raised in al-Qāhira. She narrated to al-Mundhirī, from the *shaykh* Abu'l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Musaybānī.⁶⁸ Umm Ḥasan Ghudayba (d. 635/1237) called ʿIzziyya and ʿAzīza, was the daughter of ʿInān b. Ḥumayd al-Saʿdiyya and the wife of al-Mundhirī's *shaykh* Abu'l-Ḥasan Murtaḍā b. al-ʿAfīf b. al-Jūd al-Muqaddasī. Beside her husband, she listened from Abu'l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn al-Sabiyy, Abu'l-Maʿālī Munjib b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Murshidī and the *ḥadīth* memoriser Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim b. ʿAlī al-Dimashqī. She must have been born well into Fāṭimī times as al-Mundhirī, who listened from her, states that she was very old when she died.⁶⁹ Finally, Umm al-Faḍl Karīma (d. 641/1243), who can be considered linked to the Fāṭimī period more for her distinguished ancestry than for chronological reasons. She was the grand-daughter of the famed Shāfiʿī *qāḍī* at the service of the Fāṭimī caliphs, Hibat Allāh al-Quḍāʾī. Al-Mundhirī, who listened from her, paid tribute to her family scholarly pedigree as daughter, grand-daughter and sister of traditionists. Her brother Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad, was known as al-Zunbūrī, after the Zunbūr mosque, outside al-Qāhira.⁷⁰

Conclusions

The overall picture that we can draw from this collation of fragmentary data reflects general trends already observed by R. Roded and M. L. Avila in their quantitative analyses of women's portrayal in Islamic biographical dictionaries.⁷¹ By and large, the *muḥaddithāt* of the Fāṭimī period gained their reputations more as learners than as teachers. Their mentors and their pupils were mostly men. Their learning experiences were mediated by the male-dominated scholarly family environment in which they lived. In these families, women appear to have functioned as a genealogical link for retention and transmission of knowledge within male family lines: mothers and sisters as transmitters to sons and

⁶⁷ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 3, no. 2320, pp.275-6.

⁶⁸ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 3, no. 2202, p.226.

⁶⁹ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 3, no. 2776, pp. 465-6.

⁷⁰ Al-Mundhirī, *al-Takmila*, vol. 3, no. 3146, pp.632-633. On her see also the biographies of Ibn al-Sabūnī, *Takmila*, pp.284-285; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrikh*, folio 8. She is listed among the authorities in the *mashyakha* of ʿAbd al-Muʾmin al-Dimyāṭī (b. 613/1217). See G. Vajda, G., *Le Dictionnaire*, p.102.

⁷¹ R. Roded, *Women*, ch. 4. See also M.L. Avila, "Women", pp. 149-163.

nephews and daughters as learners from fathers and brothers feature more prominently than wives.⁷² It was through intermarriage however that scholarly families merged forming or reinforcing social, cultural and economic networks founded on shared *madhhabs*, geographical provenance and class status. The reliability and rigour of these women as ‘retainers’ and ‘transmitters’ of learning is never questioned⁷³ by the narrators who reported on them but none of them are hailed as ‘producers’ of theological knowledge. They received *ijāzāt* but only rarely issued them to men, and even more rarely bestowed between women. In a social world dominated by rules of gender seclusion and decorum, female scholars are shown to have acted in seemingly close proximity with men. The sources do not tell us - outside the context of familial relations- what mechanisms were in place to ensure that gender boundaries were maintained or negotiated between male mentors and female students or vice-versa. Since youth, seniority and commitment to celibacy or asceticism rendered women sexually unthreatening to the social order, in some cases these factors might have facilitated the *muḥaddithāt*’s interaction with their male counterparts as epitomised by the encounter between al-Silafī and his mature pupil, Umm ‘Alī Taqiya. Beside the practical and logistic implementation of gender boundaries,⁷⁴ the methods of learning through which knowledge was exchanged did not necessarily demand physical proximity: *ijāzāt* could be issued by correspondence and the *samā’* system did not necessarily imply listening to the reading of a book directly in the presence of its author. On occasions, the reporting on women as *ḥadīths* informants with a focus on their distinguished scholarly pedigrees, betrayed the narrators’ real intention behind the mention of women as a being a device to establish an association between themselves and prestigious scholars whom they had had no chance to meet in person.

The above picture points to the fact that dispensation from the formalism imposed by the Fāṭimī regime on Ismā‘īlī women as learners, actually allowed greater fluidity in the possibilities that Sunnī women must have enjoyed as participants in the sharing and

⁷² This observation challenges the assertion made by M.L. Avila on Andalusian women according to whom ‘When a female link appears in the chain, it very frequently marks the beginning of a dead end. The woman does not normally pass her knowledge to anybody. If she does so, it is to another woman until sooner or later –most probably sooner- one of the women breaks the chain’. M.L. Avila, “Women”, 159.

⁷³ Issues regarding the reliability of women as *ḥadīth* transmitters are discussed in A. Sayyed, “Gender”, pp. 115–150.

⁷⁴ See examples of practical devices to separate male teachers from female learners (and vice versa) in al-Andalus in M.L. Avila, “Women”, pp. 156-7; 158.

dissemination of learning within Sunnī circles in Egypt and beyond.⁷⁵ The Fāṭimīs are rightly hailed as pioneers in promoting the formal education of women. But it is the formality of male-led *majālis* of wisdom that obfuscates the role that Ismāʿīlī women might have played not just as receivers of knowledge but as its shapers too.⁷⁶

The *muḥaddithāt* of Fāṭimī Egypt affirmed themselves in a region that had remained mostly devoid of the *madrasa* system. The late establishment of *madrasas* in Fāṭimī Alexandria and none in al-Qāhira meant that the personal prestige that elsewhere in the Muslim world came with being formally attached to an academic institution had a delayed impact as powerful signifier of social status in Egypt. Over time, Sunnīs living under a Shīʿī regime - but not necessarily serving it- had devised their own internal categories to qualify social distinction and priority. The savant-traders emerged as the elite whose scholarly reputation (and the social and economic prestige that derived from it) relied upon building extensive international contacts with other Sunnī scholars-*cum*-traders. It was the presence in Fāṭimī Egypt of this international network that helped to popularise there the fame of *muḥaddithāt* who had acquired prestige in other regions of the Muslim world. To report traditions from famous *muḥaddithāt* from Baghdād, Iṣfahān or Makka was a mark of prestige, but to have *muḥadditha* in the family became an even stronger signifier of class distinction, respectability and trustworthiness communicated – among others - through display of piety and theological knowledge of the female kin. Women linked to savant-merchants could function as ‘repositories’ of the family’s intellectual capital. With the establishment of the *madrasas* in Alexandria, the learned and pious mother, daughter and wife became figures that were *de rigueur* in shaping the public image of the professional (male) scholar. Through marriage to daughters of local notables, foreign savants eased their entrees in new social milieus.⁷⁷ All in all, the *muḥaddithāt* of the Fāṭimī period whether agents in or content of biographical narratives, ultimately served purposes to fit a male

⁷⁵ This view is somewhat corroborated by A. Sayeed’s analysis on the curtailing effects of ‘professionalism’ on women participation in the dissemination of knowledge. See A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, p.3.

⁷⁶ For an indication of active engagement in religious debates by Ismāʿīlī women during the North African phase of the Fāṭimī dynasty see D. Cortese, “‘A Woman’s work,” pp.68-72. It should be observed that, under the Fāṭimids, there is no indication that -on a day-to-day basis - the realms of Ismāʿīlī and Sunnī women (or non-Muslim for the matter) were mutually exclusive. In fact one can expect that interaction at most levels must have taken place in the public spaces typically frequented by women.

⁷⁷ On the function of women as part of ‘*ulamā*’ kinship networks in a broader ‘Abbāsīd context see A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*, pp.113-4

world and fulfil male agendas. Rather than the female voices, what we hear is the voices of the men who spoke for them. Yet, without such spokesmen these women's memory might have never been perpetuated.

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